

The World's Capital—The Bronx

Notes from the Ice Age onward on the borough that is to be UNO's temporary home.

By LEWIS BERGMAN

THE United Nations Security Council, which lately moved from the banks of the Thames, opens its New York session soon in a Hunter College building hard by the banks of Jerome Park Reservoir, a former race track in the Bronx. Thus our town's northern faubourg becomes the temporary capital of the world, and a lot of strangers to the Bronx, such as residents of Manhattan and United Nations Organization delegates from the Dominican Republic, must be wondering what sort of place it is. What of the land, they might ask, and what of the people? What are the borough's faults and virtues, what are its traditions and background? To find out, an expatriate Bronxite has made a study of the borough from primordial days to the present Bronx Age of culture. Here are the results.

THE Bronx, the study disclosed, is many things to many men. When residents of the outside world meet a Bronxite they are likely to make a waggish remark that his homeland is famous for only two things: (a) a cheer, (b) a cocktail. This attitude tends to hurt the feelings of public-spirited citizens of the borough, for there is evidence that the Bronx cheer originated elsewhere, and the Bronx cocktail is little known north of Manhattan. James J. Lyons, the borough's President and panegyrist (who was born on Leroy Street in Manhattan), had this to say the other day about the "cheer":

"It was in our Yankee Stadium," he explained, "that some visitors from distant places came here to see our champions. They apparently became so excited and

exuberated by our salubrious climate that they gave vent to their emotions in an undignified manner, producing that uncouth sound that has been unjustifiably labeled the 'Bronx cheer.' There is nothing more foreign to our cultural community than this vulgar vehicle of expression."

Actually, the "cheer" is the same thing as the older "raspberry." A dictionary of slang compiled at the end of the last century points out that coachmen in the horse and carriage days were fond of producing a "peculiarly squashy noise that is extremely irritating. It is termed * * * a raspberry and regarded rather as an expression of contempt than of admiration."

A CONCOCTION of gin, vermouth and orange juice, the Bronx cocktail is said to have been created by two Bronx bartenders jealous of the fact that Manhattan had a cocktail named after it (the Manhattan, by the way, began to appear on restaurant menus in 1894). Actual field work on the subject involved a quick tavern-to-tavern survey in the Bronx which revealed that few bartenders there know how to make the drink. In one Bronx Third Avenue bar—very similar to a Manhattan Third Avenue bar—the host declared: "I been tending bar here for twelve years and never got a call for a Bronx cocktail." In another tavern a

brawny barmaid, who looked like the pictures of women locomotive engineers in Russia, clearly thought that the researcher had spam in his head. "We got straight rye or beer," she said coldly.

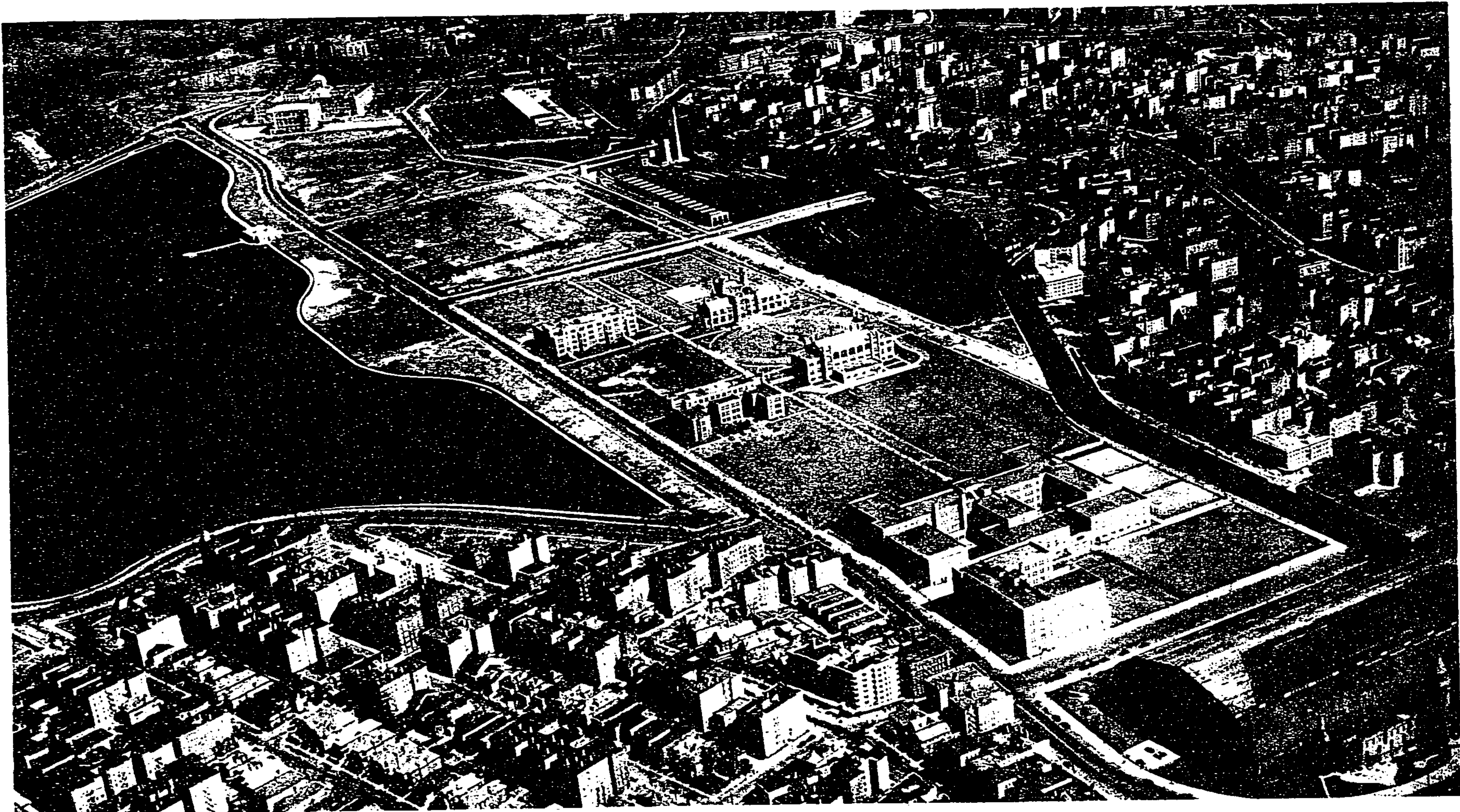
FOREIGN policy of the Bronx civil leaders is clear. It is to draw attention away from the "cheer" and the "cocktail" and to spread the borough's fame on other grounds. While advocating no autonomous movement, Mr. Lyons points out that "if the Bronx were a separate city it would be the fourth largest in the United States, being outnumbered only by the cities of New York, Chicago and Philadelphia." Many residents of glamour-conscious, razzle-dazzle Manhattan fail to recognize the importance of the sister borough, think vaguely of the Bronx as a kind of vermiform appendix that the city was born with but which is not worthy of notice unless inflamed. The Bronx, of course, has a long and honorable history of its own.

Back in the days when Indians roamed Fordham Heights much of the area that is now the Bronx was known as Keskeskeck. In 1639 the Dutch West Indies Company put through a deal with the Indians for Keskeskeck, and Jonas Bronck, a smart operator from Scandinavia, got an Indian deed for 500 acres between the Harlem and Acquahung Rivers. There Bronck and his wife, née Antonia Slag-

boom, settled down. The Acquahung (Indian meaning: "a high bluff or bank") became known as Bronck's River and later gave its name, in a modified spelling, to the entire region.

The Bronx grew slowly. By 1850 the population of only 8,500 was peacefully engaged in agriculture, the rattlesnakes and wolves that abounded there having been done in by earlier settlers. Pleasant townships of the section—West Farms, Morrisania, Westchester, Pelham and Eastchester—slept easily, a part of rural Westchester County. Then industry began to expand, and in the Eighteen Seventies New York, with its smooth talk and fancy city manners, began to lure some of the townships away from Westchester. Annexation followed in piecemeal fashion, and by 1898, when the Greater New York Charter went into effect, municipal imperialism was complete: the Bronx was officially part of One City. In 1905 the new subway burrowed through the north tip of Manhattan and came up for air in the Bronx. The frontier was pushed back, so to speak, and a real-estate boom followed. Residents of Manhattan—including a great number of immigrants on the lower East Side—migrated to the new land.

TODAY the Bronx claims 1,600,000 inhabitants. What is their way of life and what do they do for a living? About one-third of the population is foreign-born, having originated mainly in Russia, central Europe, Italy, Eire and Germany, not to speak of eight émigrés from the Azores. At the last count some 37,000 Bronxites were professional (Continued on Page 44)



Where the UNO Security Council will meet—The Bronx Center of Hunter College.

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would talk of the nubile girls who paraded the Grand Concourse (the Park Avenue of the Bronx).

Like New Yorkers in general, citizens of the Bronx were unimpressed by what they saw abroad. In one Army outfit in Hawaii several Bronx boys insisted that Orchard Beach was more beautiful than Waikiki Beach ("On Orchard you don't cut your feet on coral").

THE real story of the Bronx, some old-timers say, can be found in its River. Several streams figured importantly in Bronx history (the Mill Brook, a fairly respectable watercourse in former days, disappeared into a large sewer and was never seen again), but the Bronx River has known all the great changes. The river is not exactly the "Sorrow of the



In the Bronx Zoo.

Bronx," the way the Yellow River is "China's Sorrow"; it usually is a shallow, frustrated stream, and swells to decent size only in spring freshet.

The river runs the gamut of the Bronx. It emerges cautiously from the Westchester hills, flows south through residential districts, bubbles through the sylvan lakes and rapids of Bronx Park, then winds dejectedly through factory yards, dump lots and junk yards and finally merges with the East River.

Last month the Bronx Commissioner of Public Works, Arthur V. Sheridan, proposed that the river in its lower reaches be embanked and provided with walls and quays like the Seine in Paris. This would add a new flavor to the vieux quartier, to be sure, especially if Bronxites could then browse among the book-stalls on the river banks, smell the horsechestnut trees in bloom and sip an apéritif at an outdoor cafe.

But that wouldn't alter the real Bronx, for like Paris, the more the Bronx changes the more she is the same. Whatever her future we'll remember her this way: the Borough of the Bagel as well as the Borough of Universities, the Bronx of the "cheer" and, as Mr. Lyons puts it, the home of a "happy, friendly and neighborly folk, who are proud of their community and glad to let all know that they are Bronxites."

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or semi-professional workers, over 510,000 were in general industry and commerce and some 16,000 women, on the average, were busy having babies.

The last time the census people went around they turned up seven Bronx residents who insisted they were coal miners and nine men and two women who claimed to be in the logging business. Bronx farmers, while not exactly competing with the wheat combines of Kansas, still till the reasonably good earth on forty-three farms totaling 144 acres. The livestock, at the last tally, consisted of six horses, 1,615 pigs or hogs and two chickens. The last reported sale of poultry products involved two Bronx eggs in 1939.

IF you ask a Bronx resident where he works the chances are good that he will say "Manhattan." Over 400,000 Bronxites commute to work there every day, a state of affairs which has given rise to a description of the Bronx as the "Bedroom of Manhattan." Most of the bedrooms, by the way, are in apartment houses, for over 70 per cent of Bronx residences are of the multi-family breed.

The standard of living is generally middle class or lower middle class — the average Bronx family spends \$2,624 a year—but extremes are present as in every megalopolis. The toniest section of the Bronx is in the northwest corner of the borough, where the ties to Mother Westchester are strong. This is the quasi-suburban section of Riverdale, where flower gardens are carefully nurtured and the lawns have crew haircuts. In contrast are parts of the crowded Morrisania and Bronx Park sections, where clotheslines blossom with varicolored costumes between the tenements and the voice of the pushcart peddler is heard in the street. The borough contains "cities" within itself. In the East Bronx, Parkchester, the largest single housing project in the world, provides living quarters for 40,000 persons.

BRONX culture, Mr. Lyons is fond of pointing out, has reached an advanced stage, and indeed anyone can see that it has come a long way since the Ice Age left glacial rocks strewn all over the place. Today the Bronx is the "Borough of Universities." The roll-call includes Fordham University, Hunter College, Manhattan College, New York University and the Salvation Army College, which trains young men for officership.

Bronx residents, however, do not seem to hold more college degrees than the rest of the country's inhabitants. About 4.5 per cent of the Bronx population has had four

years or more of higher education; the country-wide average is 4.6 per cent. But residents of the Bronx live in an atmosphere dripping with culture, like Boston. The cottage in Fordham where Edgar Allan Poe lived and wrote "Annabel Lee" and "Ulalume" is preserved as a shrine. It is not certain if any part of the Bronx inspired these lines from "Ulalume":

*It was hard by the dim lake of Auber,
In the misty mid region of Weir:
It was down by the dark tarn of Auber,
In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.*

Bronx business men continue to honor the poet today. They have named a beauty

— 'BRONX, D. C. —

The Bronx almost became the capital of the United States. Lewis Morris, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, proposed the site Oct. 1, 1790, at a session of Congress, urging his fellows to recognize that:

"It is . . . advantageously situated [and] has always been particularly noted for health and salubrity . . . Persons from other places, emaciated by sickness and disease, visit it for health restoration, and after a short visit they recover and are speedily reinforced in health and vigor."

P. S.—The Bronx was not selected.

parlor, a garage and a tavern after him, and one can eat in the "Poe Cozy Nook" restaurant as well as in the "Poe Raven" restaurant. The poet laureate of the borough, however, was Joseph Rodman Drake, whose verse was positively chauvinistic. In his poem "To the Bronx" he wrote:

*Yet I will look upon thy face again,
My own romantic Bronx,
and it will be
A face more pleasant than the face of men.*

THIS poet's sentiments were shared during the war years by the 175,000 brave boys from the Bronx who served in the armed forces. Overseas some Bronxites would grow misty-eyed at the thought of The Borough, of the kids playing stickball in the streets, of soft nights in the parks, of the famous zoo. When chow was bad some would long for a sort of doughnut called a "bagel," a culinary masterpiece that Brillat-Savarin could not have surpassed. They

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